

December 12, 2012

Barbara Hawkings, Superintendent
Concrete School District No. 11
45389 Airport Way, Room 103
Concrete, WA 98237

Re: Allegations of Religious Insensitivity

Dear Superintendent Hawkings:

This written recounting of the events which gave rise to the allegations of religious insensitivity comes as a result of your e-mailed request to me on November 26th 2012.

As you may recall, Concrete School District students in grades 6th through 8th attended a Rachel's Challenge assembly on October 8th, 2012. Rachel's Challenge promotes anti-bullying practices by sharing the story of the first high school student killed during the Columbine High School tragedy in April of 1999. This national program focuses on acts of kindness and understanding and helps develop an awareness of how individuals feel when they are mistreated. Participating students are asked to make a change in the way they interact with their peers and to become aware of fellow students who are alone, left out of activities or those who are being bullied. The program discourages bullying and encourages students to stand up for those who are being bullied.

As a part of and in conjunction with that national program I relate stories, news items or histories of people who have suffered at the hands of bullies as a reminder for all of us to be kind to each other. By way of example our school lost a student last year due to a car accident; his death had a huge impact on our students. We discussed the fragility of life and how important it is to live intentionally. In addition, I shared my own sister's public school experiences of verbal abuse because of her handicap. As an extension of the program some students volunteer to share their own experiences of having been hurt by bullying. These discussions sometimes lead to students writing me personal notes and I respond to each one. That information is kept private. As a further extension and to keep the purpose of the program fresh in students' minds I had the class start a "Chain of Kindness," which has students record a kind deed they saw another student doing. These kind deeds are hung in the classroom.

On October 29, 2012, the day of the class discussion referenced in the allegation, I asked a question about who knew about Hitler or who he was. I was surprised at the lack of awareness. A few students offered what they knew and the discussion led to some members of groups who employ extreme acts such as Hamas and the Taliban. The information I shared was from a former extremist group member who had been indoctrinated that to kill a Jew or a Christian would make him a martyr. He was trained in this as a young teen, subsequently did murder people but subsequently changed his life. The point that I was attempting to make was the connection that people who intend on imposing their will on others are bullies, whether they be Nazis or others, whether they be students or adults. I was very clear that I was not talking about Muslim believers or Arabs in general but people that were trained to kill, groups that bombed and attacked people, and did not care that innocent people were being killed. I have shared this idea before, emphasizing treating others as we want to be treated which is a class developed norm.

When [REDACTED] raised her hand and said, "My father is a Muslim and these statements are not true," I explained to her that I was not talking about Arabs and Muslims in general, but groups

that chose to impose their will by training people to intimidate and kill other people. This discussion was not about religious beliefs. It is related to a state mandate that public schools teach students about bullying and not allow it.

I am surprised and saddened that no one from the [REDACTED] contacted me about [REDACTED] perceptions of the day's discussion. I would have hoped to have had an opportunity to personally recount the substance of that day's work and engage in a dialogue to dispel any misinterpretations.

Likewise, I am also surprised that organization filing the complaint did not contact me to hear my account of the class discussion before publically criticizing me and my employer. I had absolutely no intention of nor did I disparage anyone's religious beliefs and I regret any lingering misunderstandings.

Sincerely,



Mary Janda
Teacher, Concrete Elementary School